

# Leadership + Family Vacations <sup>1</sup>

By C.J. Mahaney

You've probably seen the Walt Disney World brochure, the one where the family is capped with Mickey Mouse ears, standing for a photo op with the Cinderella Castle rising in the background skyline and exploding fireworks raining down to celebrate the conclusion of a fun-filled day. Huge smiles are present on each face. But if you've ever been to Disney you know that this family can be hard to find. Many of the families at Disney appear quite different than what you see on the brochure.



What does your family look like on vacation?

What a family looks like—what a family experiences on a vacation—is largely determined by the father's attitude and leadership prior to and during the vacation.

Some fathers charge into a vacation at a place like Disney World committed to visiting every venue, seeing every show, and experiencing every ride. Every moment and detail has been planned with military precision as the father leads his wife and children on the long-awaited mission. But by noon the first day, the family has spent most of the morning standing in long lines growing more sunburned by the minute. The children are tired, cranky, and hungry. And the father has been passing his time while standing in line reflecting on the serious chunk of his salary he invested in this forgettable experience. And he is not smiling.

Other fathers choose less trendy vacation spots. This is no Disney dad. No way! This father takes his family to the lake or the beach. There are no lines here. Here the days will pass slowly and predictably. And if he's not careful and purposeful, this father can wrongly assume that location alone guarantees a wonderful and memorable vacation. It's possible for this father to view the family vacation as a peaceful and beautiful context where he can primarily rest and relax with little required of him. His wife and children desire his leadership during this time but rarely experience it. And they are not smiling.

Here's what I've learned. The difference between forgettable vacations and unforgettable vacations is not the location or attractions. Nope. The difference between forgettable and unforgettable vacations is the father's attitude and leadership. This makes all the difference.

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<sup>1</sup> This article originally appeared as a three-part series on C.J.'s blog in May of 2008 (<http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org/Blog>). You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way and do not charge a fee. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred.

Family vacations provide a unique opportunity each year for fathers to create memories their children will never forget. Memories that will last a lifetime. Memories that will be recreated by your children with your grandchildren. Memories that will outlive a father. But in order to create these memories, a father must be diligent to serve and lead during a vacation. How a father views his role on a vacation will make all the difference in the vacation.

So in this season where family vacations are being carefully planned and eagerly anticipated, I thought it might be helpful if I passed along seven lessons I've learned over the years, in hopes that your family vacation will be a God-glorifying, grace-filled, relationship-building, memory-making time together.

## **Outline**

1. A Servant Heart
2. A Tone-Setting Attitude
3. An Awareness of Indwelling Sin
4. Studying Your Family
5. Skillful Surprises
6. Intentionally Together
7. Gratefulness to God

On to the first lesson.

### **1. A Servant Heart**

Husbands are called by God to serve and lead. But we are all vulnerable to viewing the family vacation as a well-earned time away from work where we can rest and relax! But this attitude and approach to a vacation normally reveals a self-centeredness that does not please God or serve our families. Actually, God-glorifying, grace-filled, relationship-building, memory-making vacations are not supposed to be a vacation for the father. Instead of simply resting and relaxing the father has the privilege of serving, leading, planning, initiating and working.

And you will know you are serving and leading effectively on your vacation when you fall into bed at night more exhausted than at the end of the most grueling day of work. The father must enter family vacations committed to serve, lead, plan, initiate, and work, and do all this with joy. This isn't your time to rest. Only your wife deserves to rest on vacation (because no one works harder than she does the rest of the year).

But for the husband, vacations are a unique opportunity to serve and lead and work harder in some ways than he does during the normal work week. But this kind of work is a pure joy like no other work.

## **2. A Tone-Setting Attitude**

The father's attitude is the difference maker between a forgettable and unforgettable vacation. The attitude of the father transcends the vacation location each and every time. And on vacation your children are carefully studying and monitoring your attitude. The father's attitude is the tone setter, and a father who lacks joy and gratefulness will infect the entire vacation. No vacation spots in all the AAA literature will compensate for the sinful attitude of the father in coloring the entire vacation.

Children may be temporarily distracted by the venue, but ultimately the memory of that vacation will be associated with the father's joy, gratefulness, generosity, and service, or with his irritation, frustration, and anger.

And there is no vacation from the gospel. No successful family vacation is possible without the gospel and being reminded of its implications. Our joy, gratefulness, generosity, and service are all informed and inspired by the gospel.

Vacations provide unhurried periods of time where in the shadow of the cross a husband/father realizes afresh that he is doing much better than he deserves. Instead of wrath and hell God has been merciful and kind, pouring out his wrath on his Son so that sinners like you and me could experience forgiveness, justification, redemption, reconciliation, and adoption.

And because of the cross, evidences of grace abound in our lives, beginning in our families. We should be specifically grateful to God for each member of our family and express this gratefulness to them. Vacations are opportunities to discern and celebrate these unique gifts from God that we don't deserve.

No one should be happier on vacation than you are. During our vacation our children should repeatedly observe us smiling and laughing, and throughout the vacation they should be the objects of our affection and appreciation.

Your attitude on family vacation will be changed when you perceive the graciousness of God that surrounds you in the form of your family.

## **3. An Awareness of Indwelling Sin**

Don't forget about indwelling sin. Though you are going on vacation, you would be wise to remember that sin never does. Merely altering one's geography doesn't subdue or silence sin. We are deceived if we think that a mere change in location or finding an idyllic setting will somehow suspend the active nature of sin. Actually sin can be quite active on a vacation, intent on ruining it. If the husband is not prepared for sin and temptation, he and his family will be more vulnerable to sin and temptation.

A wise husband begins by anticipating how and where he will be tempted by sin on vacation. Ponder in advance your existing sin patterns and potential temptations on this vacation, and prepare in advance for those temptations.

And by all means include your wife in this process prior to vacation, and ask for her observations and correction on the vacation. Countless times on vacation Carolyn has protected me from sin with her counsel, correction, and encouragement. Gentlemen, it's not whether you will be tempted to sin on vacation, it's how and when you will be tempted to sin. Prepare now for that moment so that by God's grace you will not be deceived by temptation and sin.

And prepare your children for their unique temptations. Review with your children the temptation and tendency to be selfish or complain with specific instructions of how and when this could take place. Prepare them with appropriate passages from Scripture for their conflict with sin. And most important, prepare them for opportunities to serve and express gratefulness (particularly to mom) throughout the vacation. Make sure they understand that we are not taking a vacation from the joyful cultivation of godliness.

#### **4. Studying Your Family**

Determine in advance how to most effectively serve your family on vacation. Personally, my idea of a great vacation is nonstop activity. I love doing stuff. I don't view resting or the cessation of activity as restful or refreshing. Nope. I want to be attacking life each day and doing something every moment of each day of vacation. That's what I want to do on vacation. But I've learned that this approach to life and vacations is not shared by my wife and daughters (although I am glad to say it is by my son!).

Years ago our vacations were characterized by careful planning and maximum activity each day. Wherever we were there was stuff to do and we were going to do it all! And I expected my family would love it all and enjoy it all and at the end of each day they would effusively express their gratefulness and acknowledge that no one presently on earth or ever in history planned and led more effective vacations than I did. But it didn't work out that way.

Though it has been a number of years, I vividly remember one particular vacation when my wife wisely approached me asking if it would be possible to *rest* at some point during the vacation. Though I was perplexed why anyone would want to rest on vacation, I listened, and by God's grace learned how to more effectively serve my family on vacation. I realized that my planning for our vacation was largely informed by my preferences, not the preferences of my wife and children. That conversation with Carolyn has made a difference in my vacation planning.

And since that conversation, it has been my practice to meet with my family prior to vacation and find out from each of them what they would like to do on our vacation so I can create a context for the fulfillment of all they desire if at all possible. And so, we

don't do as much as we once did on vacation, but I'm happy to report, I am more effectively serving my family on vacation.

Now, your family is no doubt different than my family. Maybe your family loves filling each day with as much activity as possible. And maybe your idea of a vacation involves as little movement as possible each day. If so, perhaps the most effective way you can serve your family is doing as much stuff as possible each day. If you're lacking ideas, give me a call; I've got plenty of them that I haven't been able to use.

How can you most effectively serve your family on vacation? Well, in order to answer this question you must study your family and interview your family. Find out what they would like to do and if possible make it happen, even if it involves just resting and relaxing.

## **5. Skillful Surprises**

Let there be surprises during each vacation! Create a tradition of surprising your family.

Personally, I love to surprise my family (I'm sure you do too). And I try to do this throughout the year. But I want this to be a part of each family vacation as well. Effective surprises begin with studying each member of your family to discover what a meaningful and memorable surprise would involve. But trust me, each member of your family loves to be surprised.

Now, I could provide you with a list of ways I have surprised members of my family over the years, but I don't think that would serve you. It wouldn't serve you because most likely the members of my family are different from the members of your family. You see, effective surprising is a skill. It is a developed skill rooted in the discerning study of a family member. You must study them and discern their passions and gifts, their preferences and joys in order to effectively create and craft a surprise for them.

And what a joy it is to surprise them! Actually the most important effect of surprising our family is not the surprise itself but the communication of our deep affection for them through the surprise. Long after the surprise has taken place or the gift has outlived its usefulness, the expression of affection and the memory of the moment remains. Think carefully and plan purposefully whom you can surprise.

So how can you surprise *your* family and communicate *your* deep affection on your summer vacation?

## **6. Intentionally Together**

Family vacations are FAMILY vacations! Ultimately family vacations are about being together as a family, deepening our relationships with each other, conversing together, laughing together and encouraging each other. It's about telling the same stories (embellished still more) and laughing even harder than the last time.

It's about being together as a family. What a family *does* together is much more important than where a family *goes* together. It's possible to invest some serious coin in a family vacation and not experience the deepening of relationships as a family. And it's possible to have a low-budget vacation that is truly wealthy in what matters, developing close relationships as a family, and creating memories that make a difference, all for the glory of God.

So the purpose of a vacation transcends the location and transcends an individual child or the personal preference of a family member. A wise father prepares his children for a FAMILY vacation, and he adjusts everyone's expectations accordingly prior to the vacation and monitors those expectations during the vacation. This protects the vacation from merely becoming a context where each member of the family is selfishly pursuing their preference apart from consideration for the family. Remember, it's a FAMILY vacation, intended to build the family together and deepen the relationships between family members.

## 7. Gratefulness to God

Most importantly, fathers should use their vacations as an opportunity to express gratefulness to God. Family vacations are only possible because of the kindness and generosity of God.

Vacations are a gift from God. I want my family to perceive God's kindness and generosity each day, and I want them to express their gratefulness to God each day. But in order for this to take place we need discerning hearts and eyes. So at the outset of a vacation I equip my family with theologically informed discernment, because it's possible for us to be blessed by God but not perceptive of God or grateful to God. Fathers, it is our privilege and responsibility to model gratefulness to God for our family during vacations.

Last year at the beginning of our vacation, I read the following quote by C.S. Lewis to my family and took a few minutes to prepare them for our vacation and the appropriate response to God each day during our vacation. Lewis writes,

Pleasures are shafts of glory as it strikes our sensibility ... I have tried to make every pleasure into a channel of adoration. I don't mean simply by giving thanks for it. One must of course give thanks, but I meant something different ... Gratitude exclaims, very properly, "How good of God to give me this." Adoration says, "What must be the quality of that Being whose far-off and momentary coruscations [I had to look this word up!] are like this!" One's mind runs back up the sunbeam to the sun ... If this is Hedonism, it is also a somewhat arduous discipline. But it is worth some labour.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963), 89–90. Quoted in John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God* (Crossway, 2004), 18.

I love this quote. It's perfect for vacations. The content of this quote will give you new eyes, so you and your family can discern the kindness and generosity of God during your vacation. The content of this quote will inspire you to appropriately and specifically express your gratefulness to God for the many gifts you receive from him on your vacation.

But don't stop with gratefulness. Notice how Lewis distinguishes between *thankfulness* and *adoration*. I not only want my children to be grateful to God ("How good of God to give me this"), but ultimately I want them to be amazed by this God, amazed by "the quality of that Being" who has provided all these gifts, and adore him.

I informed my family of all we had planned for our vacation and informed them that we not only wanted to give thanks to God for each of these gifts, but to ponder the God who thought up and created these activities, and realize what this reveals about God so that we can appropriately adore him. So let your vacation be filled with the sounds of gratefulness but also moments of appropriate adoration. Let us realize what everything we experience reveals about God himself! You can apply this to each and every moment and activity on your vacation regardless of where you go or what you do. This quote and the content of this quote became the theme for our entire vacation last year. I pray it serves you similarly this year.

## **Conclusion**

Fathers, I hope some of the lessons I have learned over the years and the mistakes I've made and sins I've committed on vacation somehow serve you and make a difference in your vacation experience. Before you this summer is a sweet opportunity from God to deepen relationships between family members and create memories that your children will never forget, memories that will outlive you.

You can rest when you get home.